

MONDAY
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'Assembling a consensus'

on adequate education

After sitting in Friday to three hours of discussion of options for amending the state's constitution to get the school funding challenge settled, one phrase I heard stood out in my memory. It was "assembling a consensus" and I think that reflects what is going on in many quiet discussions in and out of the Statehouse.

I hope I am right. The Supreme Court has set a deadline of July 1 for the legislature to define what an adequate education is for a student. But inherent in the court decisions is that the legislature must also determine the cost of an adequate education and how to pay for it.

The Attorney General gave the first presentation and she very was blunt. There is high risk in not meeting the key elements of the Court's ruling. If the legislature doesn't act, the court could appoint a master to define, cost and determine how we pay for an adequate education.

That would take the process out of the hands of the elected legislature and have education policy determined by the court.

The Friday forum, Education Funding and the Constitution, hosted by the Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy, brought a standing room audience including more than

100 legislators. The theme of the meeting is important:

"A group of constitutional experts with a wide range of views will explain what exactly the court has said and the options for policy-makers. Experienced experts will also discuss a range of options for amendment from a very broad to a very narrow or not amending at all."



Sen. Bob Odell

Toward the end of the program, attorneys Martin Gross and Eugene Van Loan reviewed a list of the more than 20 past attempts to amend the constitution to resolve the school funding issue.

These very experienced lawyers then offered their own amendment language. While I expected very divergent language, the two proposed amendments had much in common.

This discussion about a possible constitutional amendment may interest only a few readers. But now that the Governor has suggested his potential support of a limited

amendment that would allow targeted aid to communities with the least ability to fund education, there may be more flexibility for legislators. There remain those who are steadfast in wanting a broad amendment that completely takes the court out of school funding decision making and others who want no constitutional change.

The forum on Friday was just one step on "aggregating a consensus" on one part of the solution to the school funding dilemma. But it was a good start. And it gives me optimism this could be the year to get the issue behind us.

A few days ago, while on a trip to meet a new (and beautiful) granddaughter, Victoria, two voice mail messages were left for me. They were from a prominent lobbyist seeking a meeting last Tuesday afternoon with a person she could not identify at the time. Things became clearer on Tuesday morning when I received an early morning call from another lobbyist letting me know that an announcement was being made before the markets opened that Verizon was selling its residential land lines operations to FairPoint Communications.

It is not unusual for legislators to get early notice on industry developments that affect New Hampshire or

their districts. This is especially true when the legislator is on a committee that handles issues relative to that industry. As a member of the Energy, Environment and Economic Development Committee, it was reasonable to expect a call given that the committee handles legislation dealing with the telephone industry.

Schedules did not work out so that I could meet with the FairPoint CEO, Gene Johnson, but I did visit informally with three company officials on Wednesday afternoon. It seems to me swapping Verizon for FairPoint is good news for New Hampshire. Verizon wants out of the land lines businesses; FairPoint wants land lines to be their core business.

For rural New Hampshire, FairPoint is prepared to invest \$200 million in northern New England over the next year and a half in system upgrades, new business centers, and most importantly, expansion of broadband internet service to rural areas.

Over and over again, community leaders and business folks, often owners of one or two employee operations, have complained about the lack of broadband internet services. One person, as recently as Saturday, told me he had taken a small office in town because it was wired for

broadband.

Lack of access to broadband makes rural areas less competitive in regional, national and international economies driven by the power of internet communication.

If FairPoint is successful in purchasing the Verizon land lines businesses, and they are good to their word, this transaction could have very positive benefits for rural New Hampshire.

Saturday night, county officials and staff, and friends and family of Don Clarke and Mark Pitkin joined together to recognize their contributions to Sullivan County. Mark Pitkin served two years as County Treasurer after two years as assistant to long serving Treasurer, Peter Lovely. Don Clarke served six years as County Commissioner, providing the leadership to modernize and make more efficient operations in county government.

These efforts have helped reduce the tax burden on county property tax payers.

Don was also an effective leader with the New Hampshire Association of Counties in trying to represent Sullivan County on important but complicated issues between the state and county governments. Mark and Don served county residents well and both will be missed.